Who were the last days' scoffers? (2 Peter 3:3)

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Introduction

Sometime in the early 60s AD, the apostle Peter penned a letter to Christians living in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). This was his second letter to them (1Pet 1:1; 2Pet 3:1).

To these believers Peter wrote (2 Peter 3:3-4):

> [3] *Most importantly, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.*
> [4] *"Where is the promise of His coming?" they will ask. "Ever since our fathers fell asleep, everything continues as it has from the beginning of creation."*

Who are these scoffers that Peter warns about?
What promise (or promises) would they mock?
What reason would they adduce in support?
How did Peter counter their (anticipated) claims?

Note that this article should be read in conjunction with others on this website:

1. *2 Peter 3: A Preterist Interpretation*.
2. *A Thousand Years are as One Day*.
3. *What are the Elements of 2 Peter 3*?

Who were the scoffers?

Peter is warning his readers about men whom they would soon personally encounter.
In just a few months' time — years at the most — these scoffers would proliferate.
The "last days" Peter mentions (in 3:3) are not some far-off epoch of total irrelevance to his first readers.
No, the end of all things was already "at hand" (1Pet 4:7, ESV) and THE Judgment about to begin (1Pet 4:5, 17).[1]
Peter wrote to warn his first readers about these men, and to prepare them in advance.
He clearly did not have in mind the false prophets of our own day!

[1] "Last days" in this context means the last days of Israel and of institutional Judaism — prior to that nation's termination in AD 70. See James 5:3; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 John 2:18.
Concerning the judgment mentioned in 1 Peter 4:17: The Greek text reads τὸ κρίμα (*to krima*) = THE Judgment. This is an anaphoric article which points the reader back to a judgment already mentioned — that of the living and the dead in 1 Peter 4:5.
Several translations do include the definite article: CJB, Darby, DLNT, GW, JUB, LEB, NABRE, NEB, NOG, YLT.

So, who were these scoffers?
Two points:
First, they were outsiders.
In chapter 2 of his letter Peter had railed against the false prophets who had infiltrated the churches and were wreaking havoc from within. But these scoffers would ridicule the Christian faith from the outside.
(See Appendix 3: False Teachers vs. the Scoffers.)
Second, they were Jewish scoffers.
We can say this because of their reference to "the fathers" (in 3:4, ESV).
Their claim: Ever since the time of our forefathers everything has been going on as normal.[2]

At what would they scoff?

Obviously, the promise of Jesus' return (his *parousia*).
But more than that: The promise that he would return in judgment — against them and their nation and city.
Judgment would befall them on account of their having crucified the very Son of God.
This is something the early Christians would have been proclaiming from the beginning.

Jesus himself had proclaimed coming judgment upon the generation that rejected him.
He would come again in divine glory, on the clouds, to judge (Mt 16:27-28; 24:30, 34; 26:64).
Judgment would befall Jerusalem, its temple, its leaders and citizens.
See Matthew 22:7; 23:33-39; 24:15-20; Luke 19:41-44; 21:20-24; 23:28-31.
Coming judgment was also proclaimed by:

- John the Baptist in Matthew 3:7-12.
  John fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi 4:5:
  Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful Day of the LORD.
- Peter on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:19-20):
  "… blood and fire and billows of smoke. … before the coming of the great and glorious Day of the Lord."
- Stephen. There was undoubtedly some truth to the accusation found in Acts 6:13-14:
  13 *… "This man never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.*
  14 *For we have heard him say that Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs that Moses handed down to us."*
- Other New Testament authors.
  See 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10; Hebrews 6:8; 10:25, 30; James 5:1-9; Revelation 18.

As part of their witness, Jewish Christians would certainly have warned friends and family of this coming wrath.
Nor was this matter irrelevant for those living in Asia Minor to whom Peter wrote: the Jews constituted a sizeable proportion of the total population of that region — probably more than 10%.
In Revelation, Jesus addresses believers in the province of Asia (in western Asia Minor). He twice refers to those of the "synagogue of Satan" who were harassing and persecuting Jewish church members (Rev 2:9; 3:9).
The point being this: What was transpiring in Judaea was of great interest and relevance to the Jews of Asia Minor. Synagogues throughout the Roman world were loyal to the leaders in Jerusalem and followed their advice and leading in all matters of religion, including how they ought to interact with Jewish Christians.

[2] "The fathers" (*hoi pateres*) most often refers to the Israelite forefathers mentioned in the Old Testament.
See Luke 6:23, 26; John 6:31, 49, 58; Acts 7:11, 15, 39, 45, 51, 52; 15:10; Romans 9:5; 1 Corinthians 10:1.

What reason would the scoffers adduce in support of their claims?
Basically this: That everything has been continuing on normally ever since the days of their forefathers.
Jesus' threats have not eventuated; no judgment has intervened; he clearly was not the Messiah.
And that would be true in part:
30+ years had already elapsed since Jesus made those threats and nothing had transpired.
This apparent non-fulfillment would lead to the scoffers becoming emboldened in their defiance.[3]

Peter's response

1. Peter points to God's intervention at the Flood (3:5-7).
   He had already reminded his readers of previous interventions: God's judgment on fallen angels, at the Flood, and on Sodom and Gomorrah (2Pet 2:4-9).
   God's threats and promises will be fulfilled — whether tomorrow or in 1000 years' time (3:8).
   (Peter saw a close parallel between his own time and the days of Noah. Appendix 2 elaborates on this.)
2. Peter addresses the apparent delay in Jesus' return.
   The Lord is patient (3:9), not wanting any of his elect people to perish.
   He affords them ample opportunity to repent before final wrath breaks out.
   Peter probably has in mind individual Jews who will come to faith in Christ.
   Two points concerning this delay:
   First, as discussed in the next section, Jesus himself taught the possibility of a delay in his return.
   Second, the book of Revelation describes a delay in judgment until all of God's elect people from every (Jewish) tribe have been sealed with his mark (Rev 7:1-8). These first-century Jewish believers were the "firstfruits" of a great harvest of souls for God (Rev 14:1-4; cf. Jas 1:1, 18).[4]
3. Despite this delay, the "Day of the Lord" was indeed imminent (3:10; cf. Ac 2:20; 1Thes 5:2; Mal 4:5).
   Then, "the elements will be destroyed by fire" and "will melt in the heat" (2Pet 3:10, 12).
   Almost certainly, these "elements" refer to the basic principles of Judaism — Jerusalem and the temple, with its priesthood, altars, furniture, genealogical records, etc. — all will soon be consumed by fire.[5]
4. The promised new age of "righteousness" was on the horizon (3:13).
   This new heaven and earth was foretold in Isaiah 65:17ff.
   The Jews divided time into two ages. This can be seen, for example, in the disciples' question concerning the temple's demise at "the end of the age" (Mt 24:1-3). The disciples want to know when Jesus would return as King to conclude the old age and usher in the messianic kingdom.
   Indeed, Isaiah's new creation is to be identified with the messianic kingdom of his earlier prophecies — compare Isaiah 65:25 with 11:1-9.

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[3] The fact that things were continuing on as normal in the Roman world, for the Jews as well, suggests that their war with Rome had not yet commenced. The War's outbreak in late 66 would have precluded any Jew from claiming that things were normal.
Far from it: the years 66-70 AD constituted, for the Jews, part of the Great Tribulation that Jesus had foretold (Mt 24:21; Lk 21:23). The War culminated with the siege of Jerusalem in which (according to Josephus) 1.1 million people perished. All this requires that the scoffers must have appeared well before 66, with Peter's warning given some months or years prior.
The author of Hebrews, writing in the early 60s, could claim that certain signs of the approaching calamity were already apparent (Hebrews 10:25). But perhaps a certain insight was needed to discern those things.

[4] These Jewish believers constituted the first-century faithful remnant mentioned by Paul in Romans 11:5 (ESV): *So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace.* Paul himself was part of that remnant (Rom 11:1).
In Revelation 14:14-16 John sees the Son of Man sitting on a cloud and harvesting the Jewish martyrs from "the earth" into Paradise. *Earth*, at least in Revelation 13 – 14, seems to denote the Land of Israel. Conversely, the non-elect in Israel are harvested into the "great winepress of God's wrath" (Rev 14:17-20). A double harvest, Just as John and Jesus foretold (Mt 3:7-12; 13:24-30, 36-43).

[5] All this is further discussed in my article on this website: *What are the Elements of 2 Peter 3?*

William Barclay comments:

> Some verses [of Matthew 24] paint pictures taken from the Jewish conception of the Day of the Lord. … The Jews divided all time into two ages — this present age, and the age to come. The present age is wholly bad and beyond all hope of human reformation. It can be mended only by the direct intervention of God. When God does intervene, the golden age, the age to come, will arrive. But in between the two ages there will come the Day of the Lord, which will be a time of terrible and fearful upheaval, like the birth-pangs of a new age.[6]

According to Peter, "righteousness" will dwell in the new creation (3:13).
The Greek verb translated "dwell" (*katoikeō*, Strong's G2730) means "to settle down as a permanent resident." The new world will be characterized by ever-increasing righteousness and justice.
Such a characterization should make us recall Old Testament descriptions of the coming messianic kingdom, as found, for example, in Psalm 72; Isaiah 9:7; 11:4-5; 42:1-4; Jeremiah 23:5-6.

5. His readers were to be patient and steadfast as they looked forward to the arrival of the new age.

Jesus himself hinted at a delay in his return

In his Olivet Discourse Jesus twice suggests the possibility of a delay in his return.
That delay will lead to people becoming complacent and acting as if he would never return.

Matthew 24:48-50 (ESV):

> 48 *"But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master is delayed,'* 49 *and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards,* 50 *the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know."*

And from the Parable of the Ten Virgins:
Matthew 25:5 (ESV): *"As the bridegroom was delayed, they all became drowsy and slept."*

Conclusion

Jesus promised that he would return to judge the generation that rejected him.
He would come again "on the clouds" (Mt 24:30b) — in divine glory (Mt 16:27).
Via that judgment people would "see" (perceive) him to be the One he had claimed to be — now seated at God's right hand, ruling over all (Mt 26:64; cf. Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13-14).
The fall of Jerusalem would be the "sign" of his heavenly rule (Mt 24:30a).
The Jewish scoffers knew about Jesus' threats, but as time passed and nothing significant transpired they would become complacent and start to mock. But the peace would soon be shattered with the outbreak of the Jewish War (in late 66 AD).

[6] William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1957). Via the Bible Portal website: https://bibleportal.com/commentary/chapter/william-barclay/matthew/24.

Appendix 1: Jesus' parables and coming judgment

Some of Jesus' parables unambiguously point to coming judgment of the first-century Jews:

The Parable of the Ten Minas (Luke 19:11-15, 27, ESV):

> [11] *As they heard these things, he proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately.*
> [12] *He said therefore, "A nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and then return.*
> [13] *Calling ten of his servants, he gave them ten minas, and said to them, 'Engage in business until I come.'*
> [14] *But his citizens hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to reign over us.'*
> [15] *When he returned, having received the kingdom, he ordered these servants to whom he had given the money to be called to him, that he might know what they had gained by doing business.*
> . . .
> [27] *But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slaughter them before me.'"*

Jesus taught this parable because of faulty notions concerning the coming of his kingdom (vs. 11).
His kingdom would not materialize all at once.
Rather, the king (i.e., Jesus himself) would leave in order to receive his kingdom, before returning (vs. 12).
Prior to his departure his servants would be commissioned to work in his absence (vs. 13).
The citizens who hated him resented his kingship (vs. 14).
Upon his return he called his servants to account (vs. 15).
Those who hated him were executed in his very presence (vs. 27).

This is a clear reference to the judgment of the Jews in AD 70.
Note that Jesus returns to the <u>same people</u> present when he left.
His coming to reign, though delayed, would nevertheless transpire in that generation.

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet (Matthew 22:1-7):

> [1] *Once again, Jesus spoke to them in parables:*
> [2] *"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son.*
> [3] *He sent his servants to call those he had invited to the banquet, but they refused to come.*
> [4] *Again, he sent other servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner. My oxen and fattened cattle have been killed, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'*
> [5] *But they paid no attention and went away, one to his field, another to his business.*
> [6] *The rest seized his servants, mistreated them, and killed them.*
> [7] *The king was enraged, and he sent his troops to <u>destroy those murderers and burn their city</u>."*

Here we have an unmistakable prediction of judgment upon the religious leaders and on Jerusalem.
Following a grueling five-month siege of the city, the Romans army burned Jerusalem and its temple in August/September of AD 70.

Appendix 2: Noah's Day and Peter's

It is evident that Peter saw a close parallel between his own time and the days of Noah.
A time of world-judgment was imminent, and the present order was coming to an end (1Pet 4:5, 7, 17).
Amidst all the chaos baptized believers would be "saved", just as Noah and his family were.
For Christ was their Ark, and those in him were safe.
Like Noah, they would be borne above the flood of God's wrath and brought safely into the New World.
For through baptism, they were joined to him who died and who rose again above the power of death and was now in heaven (1Pet 3:20-22).

Appendix 3: False Teachers versus the Scoffers

The false teachers of 2 Peter 2 were not the same as the scoffers of chapter 3.
John and Jude refer to these false teachers as well.
These men had infiltrated the churches (Jude 1:4) and were leading people astray (1Jn 2:26).
They were arrogant, immoral, and greedy — slaves to depravity (2Pet 2:3, 10, 14, 19).
Rather than promoting truth, they proclaimed fanciful stories (2Pet 2:3; cf. 1:16).
They had gone beyond the apostolic teaching (2Jn 1:9) — promoting things contrary to "the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 1:3, ESV).
They participated in the "love feasts" — the shared meals that also included the Lord's Supper, worship, and instruction (Jude 1:12; 2Pet 2:13). At these they feasted "without fear" (Jude 1:12, ESV), with complete disregard for the sanctity of the Lord's Supper.
They turned God's grace into a license for immorality (Jude 1:4).
They targeted new Christians, promising them freedom (2Pet 2:18-19).
Some were itinerant preachers; John warns his readers against hosting such men (2Jn 1:10-11).
Many had already left the churches, having abandoned their earlier Christian profession (1Jn 2:19).
Thus, they were "twice dead" (Jude 1:12) — having returned to their previous worldly state (2Pet 2:20-22).
Jude calls these men "scoffers" (1:18) — the same (Greek) term that Peter employs in 2 Peter 3:3.
But clearly these men were part of the churches; they were divisive, creating factions (Jude 1:19).

In contrast to these false teachers, the scoffers Peter anticipates (in 2 Peter 3) had not yet turned up.
These would mock and scoff from the outside, and openly ridicule the teaching and witness of the early Christians.

Appendix 4: Sermon by John Owen

John Owen (1616-1683) is considered by many to have been the greatest of the Puritan theologians. He served as chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, and was the vice-chancellor of Oxford University.

Owen held that 2 Peter 3 is a prophecy of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. His sermon on 2 Peter 3:11 can be found on the Christian Classics Ethereal Library website: https://www.ccel.org/ccel/owen/sermons.iv.xiii.html.
Sermon 10, entitled *Providential changes, an argument for universal holiness*.

Here is an excerpt from Owen's sermon:

> It is evident, from sundry places in the New Testament, what extreme oppositions the believing Jews met withal, all the world over, from their own countrymen, with and among whom they lived. They in the meantime, no doubt, warned them of the wrath of Christ against them for their cursed unbelief and persecutions; particularly letting them know, that Christ would come in vengeance ere long, according as he had threatened, to the ruin of his enemies. And because the persecuting Jews, all the world over, upbraided the believers with the temple and the holy city, Jerusalem, their worship and service instituted of God, which they had defiled; they were given to know that even all these things also should be destroyed, for their rejection of the Son of God. After some continuance of time, the threatening denounced being not yet accomplished, — as is the manner of profane persons and hardened sinners, Ecclesiastes 8:11, — they began to mock and scoff, as if they were all but the vain pretenses, or loose, causeless fears of the Christians. That this was the state with them, or shortly would be, the apostle declares in this chapter, verses 3, 4. Because things continued in the old state, without alteration, and judgment was not speedily executed, they scoffed at all the threats about the coming of the Lord that had been denounced against them.